

## “TELLING THE STORY”

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In compliance with Tom Boomershine’s invitation to begin this presentation by telling a biblical story that is reflective of my approach to biblical storytelling, I want to begin by telling the first biblical story I ever learned, or at least the first one I ever learned through what has now become my primary approach to biblical study, preaching and teaching. I was fifteen years past my seminary education and significantly experienced in ministry when this happened. Like so many of my colleagues in ministry, I had studied scripture extensively. I had learned and faithfully used the tools of literary, form and redaction criticism in order to preach “the Gospel” that is to be found through that process. However, I was soon to learn that, despite how much I had studied biblical “material”...I had not yet discovered what meant to hear and tell the biblical story.

The story I learned was Mark 10:46-52, Jesus healing of “blind Bartimaeus”. The occasion of my learning this story was the invitation of one of my parishioners to come to one of the early sessions of what would now be called a “guild” of the Network of Biblical Storytellers in Atlanta. She had attended one of the earliest Festival Gatherings offered by the Network, had become fascinated by biblical storytelling as an approach to biblical study and narrative preaching, and believed that I would find it enriching, based largely on my interest in narrative preaching. That group, led by Richard Ward who was then teaching homiletics at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, was my first experience of a biblical storytelling “community”, i.e. a group of “seekers” who discover profound insights about God, self and each other through a process of learning and “internalizing” the biblical narrative in a communal setting. Out of that first session, I learned:

And they came to Jericho.

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great multitude,

Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus,

was sitting by the roadside.

And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say,

“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And many rebuked him, telling him to shut up.

But he cried out all the more,

“Son of David, have mercy on me!”

And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

And they called the blind man, saying to him,  
    “Take heart; rise, he is calling you.”  
And throwing off his mantle he spring up and came to Jesus.

And Jesus said to him,  
    “What do you want me to do for you?”  
And the blind man said to him,  
    “Master, let me receive my sight.”

And Jesus said to him,  
    “Go your way; your faith has made you well.”  
And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

Before learning this story through that experience, I knew that it marked an important turning point in Mark’s “travel narrative”, being the last event prior to the triumphal entry and the passion narrative. I knew that there was an obvious contrast between the physical blindness of Bartimaeus and the spiritual blindness of the disciples. I knew various things ABOUT the story, but I hadn’t heard, felt and internalized the story. I hadn’t experienced the sequence of sounds and rhythms that make up the story, as well as its words. I hadn’t repeated Bartimaeus cry, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” without “the book” in my hands or in between me and the listener, nor had I said it aloud as an actual cry. I hadn’t heard or felt Jesus stop, when Bartimaeus made his second cry, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” It had never occurred to me that Jesus’ stopping at this point in the story is a matter of dramatic pause, leaving the listener wondering what Jesus’ response will be to Bartimaeus’ bold and audacious cry for help which also included a messianic title. Most significantly, I had never learned and explored the meaning of a biblical passage with a group of people in such an active and interactive manner, in a way that engaged us with the biblical text and with each other at the same time, resulting in a deeper awareness of both.

As a result of that experience, I soon began sharing this process of learning and telling biblical stories with a small group in the congregation I was serving as pastor at that time. The basic method for this was developed and described by Tom Boomershine in *Story Journey* (Abingdon, 1988). The mild variation on this method is what I first learned from the NOBS group in Atlanta and my earliest experiences at the annual Festival Gatherings of the Network. I’ve made my own slight language adjustments over the years. Basically, the process occurs in three phases:

#### LEARNING THE STORY....

The biblical account is broken into “episodes”, with each episode being a unit of action within the narrative flow of the text. The biblical story is learned, not as a sequence of words, but the progress of specific episodes. Participants in the group “internalize”, rather than memorize, the story. Methods for doing this include repeating the story to a partner

or a variation on the ancient practice of line chanting a passage.

#### LISTENING TO THE STORY....

This phase of the process can best be described as “group exegesis”. Having become “conversational” with the biblical story, the group then attempts to listen to the story in its original context. With this story, that means raising questions like:

- What associations did Mark’s audience make with Jericho? How would they connect this story with Jericho’s significance in Israel’s journey into and conquest of the “promised land” under Joshua and its role as the transition point in Jesus’ journey toward his passion and resurrection?
- What was the significance of Bartimaeus’ mantle falling to the ground, there at Jericho? How is this similar to Elisha’s mantle falling to the ground at Jericho in 2 Kings 2:8-14?
- Is Mark being intentional in repeating key words like “call”? When Jesus stops, he says, “Call him”. The disciples, or the crowd, “call” the blind man, who then comes to Jesus. After receiving his sight, Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the way, i.e. becomes a disciple and follows him to Jerusalem. This leaves us reflecting as to whether this is a “healing story” or a “call story”.

#### GROWING THE STORY....

This stage of the process is one of exploration of the “connections” between the biblical story and our “stories”, or life experiences. After learning the story as sounds, rhythms and actions, and sharing its meaning in its original context, participants are encouraged to respond to some of the more provocative questions which emerge out of the story. Some of those in the Barimaeus story are:

- When have you felt like a “no name”, surrounded by a crowd of people who had little or no awareness of your presence?
- When have you make some bold assertion, or acted on something very important to you, and had the people around you do everything possible to repress you and get you to stop making that assertion? When have people told you to “shut up”?
- Right now, what would your answer be to Jesus question, “What do you want me to do for you?”

This description gives only a hint of what unfolds in a process that generally occupies a couple of hours of group time, as participants move from reading words on a page to deeply internalizing a biblical story. At the end of this process, there is also a commission:

TELLING THE STORY...is, in effect, the commission that comes at the culmination of this process. Participants are urged to continue telling the biblical story they have learned

in whatever settings are available to them, whether in personal prayer life, pastoral care settings, preaching, liturgy, teaching, etc.

My own response to that commission involved acting in my role as pastor/teacher in the congregations I have served since becoming a biblical storyteller. My experiences with the Network of Biblical Storytellers, both in our group in Atlanta and at the annual Festival Gatherings of the Network, inspired my efforts to form biblical storytelling groups in congregations in Atlanta, Memphis, and now currently in Wilson, North Carolina. In all three congregational settings I've taken basically the same approach. I learn and tell biblical stories as an ongoing component in my preaching and worship leadership. The sermon text is almost always told rather than read to the congregation. The community first experiences biblical storytelling as liturgy. Opportunities are then provided which invite those who want to explore the process of learning the biblical stories and a deeper level to come to what begins as bible study and emerges into a "biblical storytelling troupe" or a corps of people who are equipped for a particular ministry, much as the choir is "equipped" to lead the congregation through music ministry. In other words, people come to the group both for their own spiritual growth and as an avenue of ministry.

In each of these congregational settings, I have utilized the basic process described above. Generally the group meets once or twice a month. Selection of biblical stories for the group is generally determined by the lectionary, so that the stories being learned can be told in subsequent worship services. It has been my goal over the years since I've been teaching biblical storytelling in the local congregation to involve members of the group in telling the biblical stories in worship at least as frequently as possible. The invitation to this process always has the "disclaimer" that participants are not required to tell the biblical stories in public. The process is offered primarily as a resource for spiritual growth and the deepening of biblical faith. Fortunately, it has been my experience that a "critical mass" of those who get involved in this process also are willing to tell the biblical stories publicly, in a variety of settings.

Through this process, biblical storytelling becomes a mode of ministry. The specific applications in the participants' personal ministries are as varied as they are as individuals. Among the personal ministries done by those who learned biblical storytelling in the groups I have led are:

- the public relations executive who went to nursing homes regularly to tell biblical stories
- the video producer who produced professional quality videos for NOBS with the assistance of others from the group
- the members who subsequently went to other churches and began biblical storytelling ministries
- the father who tells biblical stories frequently to his children and at family events
- the seminary student who incorporated telling biblical stories into her ministry as a hospital chaplain.

Perhaps the greatest public impact from this process came in 1999 at the church I served in Memphis, TN, when an opportunity emerged to produce and broadcast a weekly television program featuring biblical storytelling to children and youth. A television producer who had worked with the church on a small, simple project proposed the development of this program, largely out of his desire to produce more interesting religious programming than the weekly broadcast of worship services. Enough members of the church saw our biblical storytelling group as a unique resource for ministry that could be especially well utilized through television, that sufficient funding was raised to broadcast the program, ironically titled, "Telling the Story", for twenty-six weeks. Video copies of each program were also generated, along with a discussion guide for use in various educational settings.

As I have led people through this process over these past fifteen years, I've observed some profound dynamics at work as biblical storytelling enables them to encounter scripture at a significantly deep level. Moving beyond the silent reading of the text to an experience of a biblical story as sound, rhythm, pauses, inflection, movement and emotive response tends to make the text more inviting and fascinating. Just recently one of the participants in our East Carolina NOBS Guild said, "You know, you never really see this stuff in the scripture until you learn it as a story."

Internalization of the text becomes its own form of prayer, meditation and spiritual formation. Dennis Dewey, Executive Director of NOBS, emphasizes the degree to which biblical storytelling fulfills the directive given to ancient Israel in the Shema (Deut. 6:4-9). After the affirmation that God is one, and the commandment to love God with all your heart, soul and might God's people are told to "KEEP THESE WORDS .....IN YOUR HEART." For our ancestors in the faith, this took the form of reciting them to their children; talking about them when at home and away from home, when rising and lying down; binding them as a sign on the hand and an emblem on the forehead, and writing them on the doorposts and gate. Participants in these biblical storytelling groups talk about how they learn, internalize and repeat the story while jogging, driving to work, sitting in the bathtub, and ironing the clothes. They experience a deepening process of talking about and reflecting on the biblical story together. In short, they experience fresh application of the same ancient spiritual discipline practiced by our ancestors in the faith.

Another phenomenon that has been exciting to experience is the tendency for phrases from biblical stories to become part of the subtle vernacular of the group. In the same ways that families or other relationally bonded communities develop their own systems of "inside stories", code words and comical references, so does a biblical storytelling community. This means that a significant degree of intimacy has developed in the group around the images and language of the biblical story. It is another sense in which the biblical story has integrally become a part of our story. When people become engaged with the scripture in this way, involving intellect, emotion, and the investment of our own personal experience, the biblical story, which has always essentially been ours by virtue of their membership in the "family of God", becomes a story that we also claim as our own. Consequently, responding to the "commission" to TELL THE STORY is not a burdensome task but an experience of our deepest joy.

